



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

THOMAS COUTURE.



HERE was an exhibition in the Champs Elysées last autumn of a large number of works of Thomas Couture, who died in March of the year previous. He was sixty-four years old at the time of his death, and had been regarded twenty-five or thirty years earlier, when at the height of his fame, as the first painter in the world. He had been dead now but a few months, had painted and taught as long as he lived, and yet it was truly said of him that he was little known by those of to-day, and that his former friends and admirers had wholly forgotten him. To the writer, unfamiliar with Couture except from the large picture so long in the Luxembourg, *The Decadence of the Romans*, this exhibition was a surprise and a revelation. The artist was unmistakably a man of genius. It is proposed in this paper to give a brief idea of the exhibition, and then of some phases of the painter's career and talent that may account for the singular instability of his fame.

The collection represented the artist quite fairly, although some of his finest works were wanting. Here were merely the pictures belonging to his estate, and such others as could conveniently be reached. There were two hundred and forty-five numbers in the catalogue, and of these forty-three were designs in black and white.

The famous pictures called *The Falconer*, now in Berlin, *The Prodigal Son*, burned in the great Chicago fire, *La Courtisane Moderne*, at present in Philadelphia, and other of the painter's important works, were here shown in sketches more or less complete, or in slight first impressions. Of the two hundred and two canvases exposed, perhaps fifty could be called completed pictures, and these were chiefly portraits; the rest were studies or sketches. There were a few paintings of still-life and some landscapes. The still-life was superbly done, but the landscapes were not remarkable. They were far from bad, but they could not be favorably compared with the excellent work on every side of them. Couture was not a landscape painter.

To one familiar with the painting of W. M. Hunt, the first impression on entering this exhibition was that of a sense of acquaintance with many of the things before him. Here was Mr. Hunt's modelling, coloring, *technique*, his manner even of posing his subject. The head of the *Italian Girl* directly before us, partly covered with a white cloth, looked as if it could have been done by no one but Mr. Hunt. It seemed strange that there should have been such sustained and striking general resemblance in the work of two men who had parted thirty years ago, each going resolutely in his own direction.

Behold here more than the vacillation of Mr. Hunt in the many things begun, and the few finished. See the impetuosity and zeal in the large sketches, left unfinished a dozen years ago. Look at the colossal canvases of *The Enrolment of the Volunteers* and *The Baptism of the Prince Imperial*, both incomplete, even as sketches. It would seem as though the hand that built them

up were palsied just at the critical moment, at once and forever. A few weeks of earnest work would have finished either of them at any time during the past twenty years. A few days' labor, even, would have completed them as sketches. A mere touch here and there would have spared a pang of regret to many a visitor. Now, there is an incongruity of finish in these huge sketches that is tantalizing. There are complete figures by the side of others just as important, but so vaguely drawn or colored as to be little better than empty spaces. There are nicely finished heads without bodies, and many well-defined bodies without heads. Napoleon III. suffers the lack of a head, though his imperial-looking body stands near the centre of the picture of *The Baptism of the Prince Imperial*. By his side is the figure of the kneeling Empress. The latter is exquisitely graceful in style and conception,—a fine example of the artist's exceptional ability in portraiture. Devout and reverent, she has still not quite forgotten that she is an empress. Immediately behind her stands the Princess Mathilde, drawn and painted in a manner to indicate that no further work upon any part of the figure was intended. The painter has succeeded in giving her an air neither of humility nor arrogance. She stands majestic and noble, as though aware, but yet unconscious, of her great position.

Doubtless the attractiveness of the entire exhibition was much increased from the fact of its being so largely made up of sketches, studies, and first impressions. These things are generally attractive. Just how large a part of our admiration for such fascinating imperfections is due to the fact that their unfinished condition gives full scope for suggestion and imagination, so that virtues are magnified and faults or weaknesses overlooked, it is impossible to say. Artists and cultivated observers are certain to be enamored of the possibilities of a fine sketch. When finish comes, all the possibilities go, and the painter is fortunate or very wise, like Corot and Millet, if the greater part of the suggestiveness does not vanish also. How to remove vagueness and substitute precision and firmness in a sketch, and yet keep all the suggestiveness and mystery, is the problem.

We saw here how the workman began, and went on step by step to success. There were strewn about scraps of his large pictures, arms, hands, feet, heads, fragments that we could follow to his great compositions and greet as old acquaintances. One felt all the pride and elation of being the artist's next friend and confidant, a privileged visitor in his most inner studio, and a welcome sharer of his failures no less than his triumphs. This was a rare occasion for the indulgence of the puerile satisfaction of tracing hands and feet to their ultimate destination. The amount of time, labor, and research spent by Couture in this preparatory work for his large pictures was incredibly great. There were no less than twenty-seven separate studies, chiefly of parts of the human anatomy, for the one great sketch, *The Enrolment of the Volunteers*. A good example of a study of two heads for this picture is given in one of the accompanying illustrations. There were seventeen similar studies for *The Baptism of the Prince Imperial*, and, in all, eighty-one studies that could be traced to their places in the larger compositions, not including many of less moment in black and white. Here were other fine studies of heads, hands, and figures, made at different times as examples for his pupils. All these fragments were appropriately framed and hung. Firm in line, strong in modelling, perfectly colored, and complete in every respect, meritorious far beyond most works of their kind, they were worthy of being framed as pictures.

I recall a study of the human foot, the perfection of drawing and color. To an American painter visiting him at his country-house, years after he had apparently relinquished work on his large *Volunteers*, he said, "I have been waiting to find a good model for a foot for my *Volunteers*. I could find no good feet in Paris; they are all spoiled by wearing ill-fitting shoes." He had at last found a baker, whose feet were mainly exercised in kneading dough, and had got a model that he thought meet for the bare foot of one of his soldiers.

Couture tried his marvellous hand at nearly every variety of subject;—portrait, genre, fantasy, history, allegory, mythology, the Bible, all lent him themes. And the variety in subject is



T. COUTURE, PINX.

W. B. CLOSSON, SC.

THE YOUNG SQUIRE.

THE ORIGINAL IN THE POSSESSION OF MR. FRANCIS BARTLETT, BOSTON.

nearly matched by his different manner of painting. Sometimes his modelling is strong and black, the flesh or stuffs slightly relieved in half tint, the whole enveloped in rich dark mystery; then we find a picture as clear and transparent as crystal, the vigor replaced by a softness of modelling and the mystery by an amber glow that reminds one of the Venetians. These were the extremes in manner, and between these extremes there were numerous pictures showing an intermediate style. Somewhere he had apparently touched the entire gamut of color from light to darkness.

I have said that the exhibition as a whole was a revelation, and that it showed the artist to be a man of genius. Indeed, as far as mere technical skill is concerned, it is not easy to point to his equal. With the possible exception of Regnault, he has had hardly a rival in this respect since the death of Gericault. But besides the resources of a great *technique*, such as facility, rapidity, boldness, firmness, and certainty, he had a splendor of conception, a largeness in composition, that characterize the great masters.

His compositions are admirably arranged. There is logical disposition of the masses, fine grouping of figures, strength, unity, clearness, and breadth, that mark him as one capable of the greatest achievements. These qualities are most observable in the immense canvases of the *Baptism* and the *Volunteers*. There is a grandeur in these compositions that one finds in no other part of the exhibition.

With genius, talent, industry, ambition, and energy, and a home in the very centre of art activity, why did Couture so fail in making himself felt in the art world, that for the last fifteen years of his life his name was almost never heard? Why, when he died, was there no real sense of the loss of a great artist? He painted continuously, and yet some who had once known him thought him dead years ago. It may not be easy to find a complete answer to these questions, but there are many circumstances that contributed to make the fame of this great artist brilliant and meteoric, rather than solid.

Couture's talent culminated early: it was precocious. As a boy, he made a sketch which he sold for a hundred francs. His father, a humble mechanic, frightened at the sight of so much money, thought the boy had stolen it, and that the *gens d'armes* would be after the family. His mother was wiser, and believed in her son and his talent. A portrait of her by Couture bears a marked resemblance to the latter.

In his book called *Méthode et Entrétiens d'Atelier*, Couture relates the painting of a portrait of a fellow-student in the studio of Gros, as a diversion from his serious work. One of the pupils showed the portrait to the master, who remarked that he should be proud to put his own name to it. Learning that it was the work of young Couture, he turned to him and said, "If you continue to paint like that, you will be the Titian of France." This prediction was almost literally fulfilled. At the age of thirty-two, of all the French painters he was the most famous. At this time both Troyon and Diaz may be said to have sat at his feet. Diaz profited from Couture's skilful methods. His color became richer and more transparent. Troyon, who had at first painted in the dry manner of Cabat, and then followed Constable, profited also, adopting Couture's whites and his transparent blacks. He was modest, and regarded Couture as his superior, taking his pupils out to visit him. Of an American artist at this time he asked: "Have you studied with Couture? If not, you should do so: he is a great man." Heretofore both Troyon and Diaz had followed Eugène Delacroix in his purples and silver tints. Delacroix was twenty years the senior of Couture, but at this period was by no means of equal fame. He had a firm artistic reputation, but had not yet won the applause of the public. His pictures sold at low prices, while Couture's were dear. For a large picture sent to London, Delacroix refused an offer of sixty pounds. He was in need of money, or, at least, was very desirous of disposing of the picture. The expense of transportation had been considerable, and he afterwards regretted that he had not accepted the offer. Lately, the Duc d'Aumale has been fortunate enough to secure this picture for his collection, at the price of two hundred thousand francs.

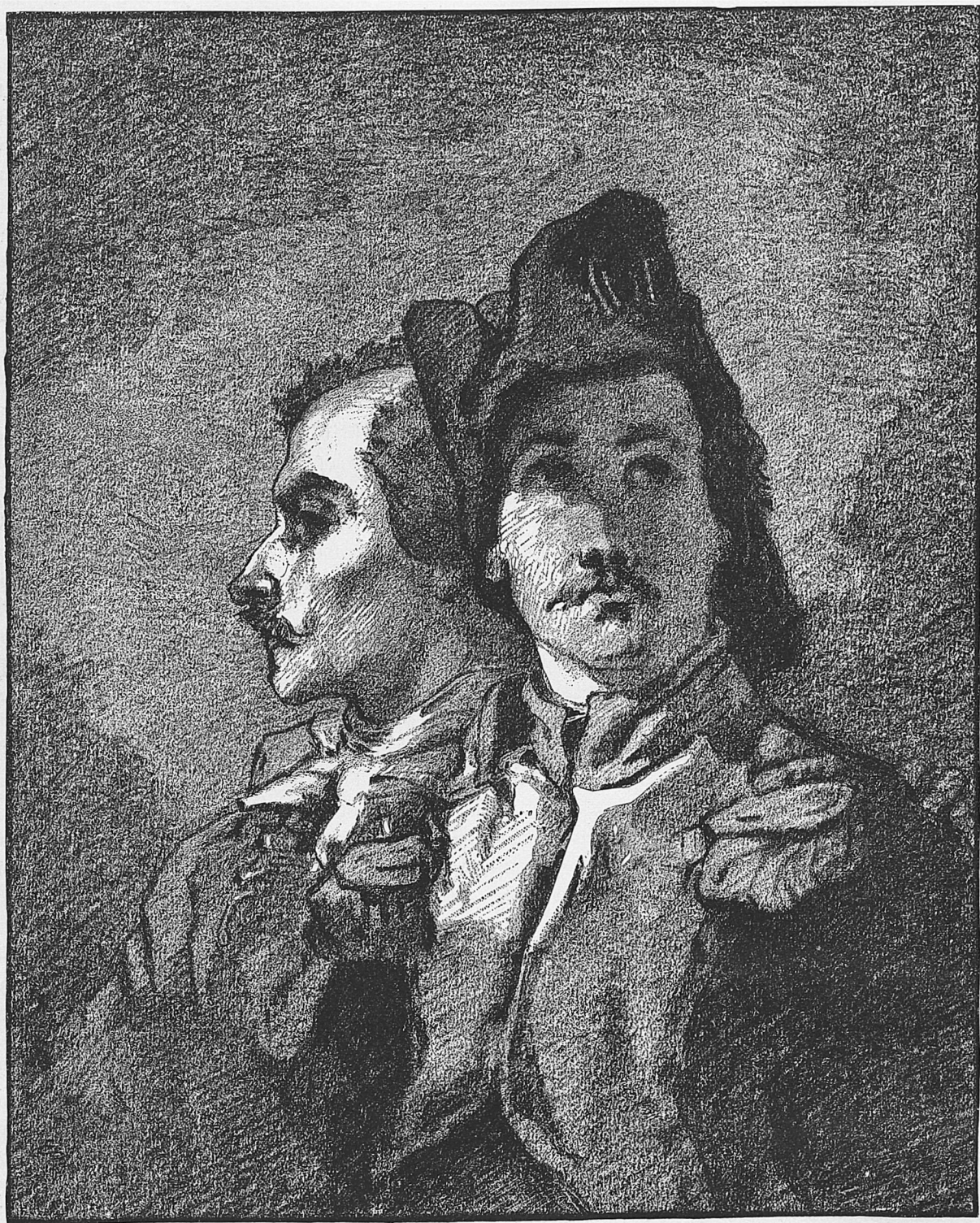
The work that contributed most to Couture's fame, *The Decadence of the Romans*, was exhibited at the Salon of 1847, when the painter was thirty-two years old. Within a few years from this time the fame of Couture began steadily to decline, notwithstanding his talent and activity. At this period a new epoch of painting had begun in France. A school of artists who had emancipated themselves from the trammels and traditions of the old ways were slowly but surely making themselves felt. These painters went to nature for inspiration. Constable in England had given the impulse, and Gericault and others had brought it home to France, where it was destined to grow and revolutionize art ideas. With this new school Couture had no sympathy. He was an ardent lover of the old masters, seeing as they saw, and trying to work as they worked. His art was theirs. He counselled his pupils, indeed, to work from nature, but he went himself to the old masters for inspiration. With real, out-of-door nature he had no intimacy. Gericault, Troyon, Delacroix, Millet, Rousseau, Jules Dupré, and Corot went directly to nature, and saw for themselves.

An artist once said to Mr. Hunt of some pictures of Millet and Corot, "These paintings are not complete. They are not finely drawn, like the work of Claude, Ruysdael, and others of the older painters." "No," said Mr. Hunt; "but these artists do not attempt to equal the older ones in these respects. Such things have already been carried to the highest excellence. But they try rather to give nature in its intimate, out-door aspect, a thing that has never been attempted before." To equal what has been done before is not sufficient to put one on a level with the greatest. The best must in some respects be surpassed. Couture was willing to follow in his masterly way what had been done for centuries. One feels in the presence of his works that, after all, they are but magnificent reproductions. Somewhere or other all their fine qualities have been met with before. In studying the exhibition you come upon a Ribera, a Veronese, a Poussin, a Diaz. Nearly all his things may be classified as of certain schools or masters. His brilliant reproductions added little or nothing to art. One of the best of his finished pictures, said to have been destroyed by the Prussians, was called *The Thirst for Gold*. There was a sketch of it in the exhibition. But it was, in reality, only a splendid Spagnoletto; a marvel of skill, its great qualities had been seen before. The picture that gave the artist his great fame, *The Decadence*, was not so markedly a Paul Veronese, but one never saw it without thinking of that master.

Leaving out the recognizable portraits, and taking the rest of the pictures alone as guides, one would scarcely be able to guess at what period of the world this painter lived. He would inevitably be set down as belonging to some past age, when nature was held in less and manner in greater esteem than at present.

This entire lack of sympathy with the rising school put Couture apart from his contemporaries. As they grew strong, he sedulously avoided them, leaving Paris and working by himself. Nevertheless, as they became a power, he could not wholly resist their influence; but believing neither in them nor in their ways, this influence made itself felt mainly in weakening his faith in himself. The result was, that he absorbed from them nothing of worth, and gradually lost many of his own vital characteristics. He fell off in largeness and in freedom of handling. The old dash and brilliancy were less marked. These defects were plainly observable after he relinquished work upon the great sketch of *The Baptism of the Prince Imperial*, in 1857. Later in life he lost still more of that technical brilliancy that had made him distinguished.

Twenty years after this, and only three years before his death, he exhibited at the Salon four excellent pictures, as if to compete for the honor of a medal, which he had refused to accept in 1855. One of these pictures, *L'Avocat*, represented a man seated at a table, his left hand fumbling the leaves of a big book, the other extended forward in gesture, as if he were earnestly addressing an audience not seen on the canvas. This picture had been painted earlier, and had many of the fine qualities of the artist. But the public failed to respond to these



SKETCH FOR A GROUP IN "THE VOLUNTEERS."

BY THOMAS COUTURE.

DRAWN BY E. H. BARNARD, FROM THE ORIGINAL IN THE MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, BOSTON.

last efforts of one who had long since left Paris, given up his school, and ceased to exhibit. The pictures attracted little attention.

Couture had never much popular appreciation outside of his own country. He had large patronage as a teacher, and his reputation abroad was confined chiefly to his pupils and to artistic circles. This lack of feeling for nature and for modern notions of painting would of itself tend to limit his fame to his own land. His great contemporaries were widely known abroad, because of their devotion to the new and more original school. Couture's talent fascinated a limited number,—those living in art centres, who appreciated work reminding them of that with which they were familiar in the galleries, or that which appealed mainly to a love of skill in painting. In other words, it pleased most those who were familiar with art rather than with nature.

His pupils admired him, as a matter of course. His *technique* dazzled them, and he was an interesting and brilliant talker, but his atelier was sometimes of doubtful advantage. Young students were made to attach undue importance to the ways and means of putting the paint on the canvas. Hunt used to say that Couture was a good teacher of men, but boys he ate up.

During the latest years of his life he seemed, on inquiry, to be always busy upon the picture called *La Courtisane Moderne*,¹ three sketches of which were in this exhibition. This production is a great descent from the noble subjects and broad canvases of his best period. It represents a female in semi-transparent robes, half seated, as a driver, upon a high blue-velvet cushion on the front seat of an American-looking open carriage. In place of horses she drives men, of whom there are four,—apparently a poet, prince, author, and actor. To judge by the difficulty in counting the spokes of the wagon-wheels, the animals are taking vigorously to their work. Behind the courtesan sits the old mother, who glares eagerly about her, noting the effect of her driver's enterprise. The idea of this composition is rather taking at the first glance, but there is no artistic quality in either of the three sketches creditable to one of Couture's ability.

Aside from the artistic limitations spoken of, there were obstacles to an enduring popularity in Couture's personal traits. He was inordinately vain, and had little tact in holding this characteristic in check. Continually overestimating himself, his importance in the art world, his own work, he was continually underestimating others and their work. Believing, or affecting to believe, only in himself, he could teach, but had nothing to learn. All who approved what he did were wise, and his friends; all who disapproved, or were indifferent, were lacking in judgment or moved by jealousy, and were enemies. He professed not to believe that any artist or intelligent amateur could dislike one of his pictures. Hearing that the artist Français had been to see one of his paintings, he inquired of a friend what he said of it. "Nothing," was the reply. "Ah!" said Couture, "he is jealous, too jealous to speak." Having achieved celebrity, he put himself on a pedestal, and when all the world would not fall down and worship him, he denounced it as an enemy, and withdrew from it to Villier-le-Bel. There, from his country-seat, he launched his thunderbolts against everybody and everything. And these thunderbolts were real. His wit and sarcasm, his power of expressing contempt, were as remarkable as any other part of his individuality. No weakness of a fellow-artist escaped his eye or his tongue. Many years after Mr. Hunt had left him, he inquired of an artist then visiting his studio how Hunt was getting on, and what he was doing. The reply was, that he was engaged mostly in portrait-painting, and doing some excellent work. "Yes, yes," said Couture; "no doubt he is doing fine things. He has talent, but what did he run off to study with that fellow in Barbizon for? Why, that Millet paints peasants so poor that they have n't even a wrinkle in their trousers." Not unfrequently he turned to the brush for aid in expressing his sense of the

¹ See a sketch of this picture, under the title of *Le Triomphe d'une Femme Équivoque*, in No. 6 of this REVIEW, for April, 1880. The original is in the possession of Mr. Henry C. Gibson, Philadelphia. — The woodcut which accompanies this article is from an admirable painting owned by Mr. Francis Bartlett, of Boston. A head of *A Bacchante*, very similar in general treatment, is in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. — EDITOR.

ridiculous. Our illustration, *A Realist*, is an example of his work of this kind.

But he confined his critical attentions by no means to his colleagues in art. His hand was against everybody. He scolded and defied the government, the Beaux-Arts, the picture-dealers, and the public generally, as well as the artists. He declared that he was a Republican, and would never finish *The Baptism of the Prince Imperial*. When a government messenger came to his studio to learn why the picture was not done, he said, "I'm not a tailor, to finish up my work and carry it home Saturday night."



A REALIST.

FAC-SIMILE BY CHARLES METTAIS. — FROM A DRAWING BY T. COUTURE.

Some of his finest pupils, like Léon Belly and Charles Marcel, who got medals and honors, refused to subscribe themselves as his pupils, lest their pictures should be rejected at the exhibitions, or regarded with disfavor by the juries. The picture-dealers naturally threw their influence against him. He had never favored them. When Hunt was his student, he proposed to Couture that they should make a tour of the provinces, and paint portraits of the peasants at ten dollars a head, for the purpose of education and amusement. Couture was delighted at the proposal, but, after a week of reflection, he changed his mind. "It would never do," he said; "the picture-dealers would make money out of us." He was always anxious lest the picture-dealers should make money from his pictures. This deprived him to a large extent of their aid in distributing his paintings. Yet Couture managed his business affairs with such shrewdness as to get well paid for his work. Whenever one of his pictures found its way to the auction at Hôtel Drouot, it brought a good price.

His way of speaking of contemporary artists is aptly illustrated by a passage in his book,

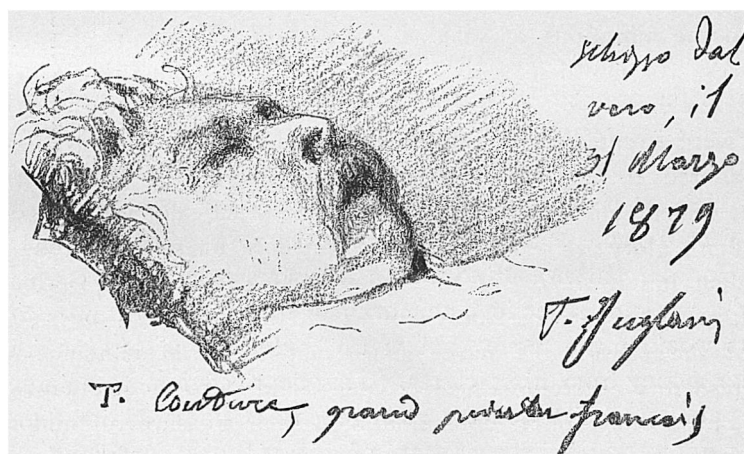
published in 1867. In criticising the disposition of painters to be what they are not, he says: "Et le paysagiste, lui, qui est le plus petit de tous, veut tout manger." These painters whom he published to the world as "the least of all" were Troyon, Diaz, Rousseau, and Corot, neither of whom had in some respects his technical skill, but who were, notwithstanding, men of original ideas, who carried forward the art of painting, and left a more indelible impress on their profession than that of their unwise critic.

He hated Delacroix, and said of him in his book that he lacked originality, that his *Medea* was a poisoned Rubens, that he had ardor without force, and assumed the rôle of a creator, which he was not. Then he adds: "He had one very attractive talent; in this he is almost a genius; he might have been a wonderful copyist." (!) When this singular criticism appeared, Delacroix, whom his fellow-artists believed to be in some important respects the greatest of modern painters, had been dead five years. It is not possible that Couture should have been blind to the great genius of Delacroix, and especially to his originality as a colorist, of which he says not a word. The key of this depreciation is to be found in the fact of Delacroix's want of enthusiasm for *The Decadence of the Romans*, Couture's early success. Delacroix said it was fine, but not founded on nature.

It is doubtful whether Couture had the power to finish up his two large sketches in the magnificent manner of their beginning. The *Decadence*, brought over from the Luxembourg Gallery to give *éclat* to the exhibition, is a less effective work than these, even in their incomplete state; and the finished decorations in the chapel of the Church of St. Eustache are less powerful than their promise, as seen in half a dozen sketches for them in the exhibition. Whether this weakness of the artist may have been due to his favorite method of painting *en frotté*,—a method so admirable for sketching, but so difficult in the uniting of separate parts of large spaces, painted at many intervals,—it is impossible to say. At all events, his phenomenal talent was best displayed in his sketches and studies, and in whatever could be done quickly. It is, perhaps, reasonable to suppose that his disposition to leave pictures and sketches incomplete was partly due to an excess of creative power or imagination, that hurried him from one conception to another, robbing him of sufficient time to fully embody his ideas.

Couture was brilliant, but lacked balance and solidity. One may take from his book the words he wrote of Delacroix, and apply them with greater truth to the writer himself, viz.: "He lacked order in his organization. He had fire in him, but he used it so badly that the flame devoured him."

HENRY C. ANGELL.



COUTURE ON HIS DEATH-BED.

DRAWN FROM NATURE.—BY T. JUGLARIS.